

Executive Summary

2014 International Religious Freedom Report

Introduction

In Mosul, Iraq and nearby towns, shortly after the takeover of the area by militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Christians who had been given the choice to convert, pay a ruinous tax, or die, gathered their families and what few possessions they could carry, and sought all possible means to escape. Their community, having been a part of the rich culture and history of this city for more than a thousand years, was being threatened. Three-year old Christina Khader Ebada boarded a crowded bus with her mother to leave when suddenly one of the fighters guarding the checkpoint tore Christina from her mother's arms. The panicked mother followed him, pleading with him to return the girl. "Shut up," he responded. "If you come close to this little girl you will be slaughtered; we will slaughter you." And she was forced back on the bus, leaving her baby behind, never to know what became of her. Christina and her family were also victims of ISIL's brutal persecution, which has targeted all those, including religious and ethnic minorities, who oppose or do not fit in with ISIL's ideological vision and its categorical and violent opposition to religious freedom.

David Saperstein, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF) has said, "There is an absolute and unequivocal need to give voice to the religiously oppressed in every land afraid to speak of what they believe in; who face death and live in fear, who worship in underground churches, mosques or temples, who feel so desperate that they flee their homes to avoid killing and persecution simply because they love God in their own way or question the existence of God."

The International Religious Freedom Report, now in its 17th year, attempts to give voice to those oppressed people and to document when and where the universal human right to religious freedom was violated. Congressionally-mandated and comprising almost 200 distinct reports on countries and territories, this report continues to reflect the United States' commitment to, and advancement of, the right of every person to freedom of religion or belief. This year's report details the actions of Non-State Actors, including rebel and terrorist organizations, who committed by far some of the most egregious human rights abuses and caused significant damage to the global status of respect for religious freedom. In some cases, government failure, delay, and inadequacy in combatting these groups and other societal actors had severe consequences for people living under dire religious

freedom conditions. Anti-Semitism continued to be a major problem around the globe with increases in anti-Semitic incidents recorded in many countries. In May 2014 the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) released the results of a survey conducted in 102 countries between July 2013 and February 2014, which sought to measure support for 11 common anti-Semitic stereotypes among national populations. Other concerning trends over the year included increasing use of combatting terrorism and extremism as an excuse for unreasonable religious restrictions.

Government Failure to Protect Against IRF Abuses Committed by Non-State Actors

In the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and throughout Asia, a range of non-state actors including terrorist organizations, have set their sights on destroying religious diversity. Members of religious groups were disproportionately affected, often suffering harsh and hateful treatment of non-state actors. In these regions, religious intolerance and hostility, often combined with political, economic and ethnic grievances, frequently led to violence. Governments stood by, either unwilling or unable to act in response to the resulting death, injuries and displacement.

Stability in **Iraq** declined precipitously this year as the collapse of government security structures in parts of the country prevented leaders from stopping ISIL's territorial offensive and subsequent atrocities. Likewise in **Syria**, the effective control by various non-State groups of portions of the country's territory contributed to a precipitous decline in religious freedom. On both sides of the border, **ISIL** sought to eliminate members of any group it assessed as deviating from ISIL's own violent and destructive interpretation of Islam. It has forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of people, conducted mass executions, and kidnapped, sold, enslaved, raped and/or forcibly converted thousands of women and children—all on the grounds that these people stand in opposition to ISIL's religious dogma.

Shia militias in Iraq also committed abuses, targeting some Sunnis with abductions, execution-style killings, torture, and threats, as well as destruction of homes and businesses. In some instances, these militias reportedly prevented internally displaced Sunnis from returning home. The Prime Minister has emphasized a zero-tolerance policy for human rights violations and abuses and called for the protection of religious minorities, but the government's capacity to protect civilians from the ongoing conflict was limited.

In Syria, the group **al-Nusra Front** also controlled significant territory, conducting targeted executions of religious leaders including seven Druze clerics in Dara province and Jesuit priest Frans van der Lugt in Homs. **Al-Nusra Front** also kidnapped priests and nuns on multiple occasions, and engaged in bombings and other religiously-motivated attacks.

People living in northern **Nigeria**, the Far North Region of **Cameroon**, and southern **Chad** and **Niger** were subject to terror and destruction as a result of **Boko Haram**'s quest to impose its religious and political beliefs throughout the region. Civil society groups estimated that Boko Haram killed more people in 2014 than the previous five years of the conflict combined. In addition, many of Boko Haram's vicious attacks were targeted against civilians, government officials, and military forces. The group deliberately targeted Christians, as well as Muslims who spoke out against or opposed their radical ideology. As West Africa's most active terror group, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for scores of fatal attacks on churches and mosques, often killing worshipers during religious services or immediately afterward. One of many such incidents occurred on April 14, when Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 mostly Christian girls from Chibok, Borno State, sold them into slavery, and forcibly converted them to Islam. Conflict in the northeast has displaced some 1.5 million Nigerians inside the country and forced some 200,000 refugees to flee to neighboring countries.

In **Pakistan**, organizations designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the U.S. government intimidated religious groups through attacks or threats of attacks. **Lashkar i Jhangvi** claimed responsibility for a January 21 suicide bomber attack on a bus carrying Hazara Shia pilgrims in Balochistan's Mastung District, killing 24 and injuring 40. **Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)** released a video on February 2 threatening two minority groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Kalash and the Ismailis, with death if members refused to convert to the TTP's interpretation of Islam. Additionally, sectarian, violent extremist, and terrorist groups attacked houses of worship, religious gatherings, and religious leaders, causing hundreds of deaths during the year. Police often failed to prevent such attacks and authorities failed to investigate, arrest, and prosecute those responsible for the religiously-motivated attacks.

During the summer of 2014, countries such as **France** and **Germany** witnessed a wave of anti-Israel sentiments that crossed the line into anti-Semitism. The surge in anti-Semitism in Western Europe during 2014 left many pondering the viability of Jewish communities in some countries. Although most anti-Semitic incidents

consisted mainly of hate speech and the desecration of institutions, monuments, and cemeteries, others turned violent. On May 24, Mehdi Nemmouche, a French Muslim national from the northern town of Roubaix who had been radicalized in prison, entered the Jewish Museum of Belgium and shot dead two tourists and a woman. The fourth victim, a museum employee, also succumbed to his wounds. Nemmouche had a camera attached to his chest so he could film his murders, and a white sheet with the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) penned in Arabic. He had previously spent 11 months training with ISIL in Syria.

In **Burma**, continued deficiencies in the respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom included societal violence against religious minorities, including Rohingya and other Muslims and Christians, the destruction of religious buildings in areas of conflict, policies prohibiting or impeding Muslim land ownership and property occupation in some areas, and the proposed “Protection of Religious and Race Laws” which, if enacted, could be enforced in a manner that would significantly undermine religious freedom. The anti-Muslim sermons of the 969 monks, other prominent monks, and the Buddhist Committee for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) were circulated widely via print journals, DVD, and the internet. The sermons denigrated Muslims and sometimes Christians and Hindus, called for a national boycott of all Muslim-owned businesses, and cautioned Buddhists against interaction with Muslims. Journalists and activists received death threats for covering and speaking out against anti-Muslim hate speech and religious-based violence.

Societal Tensions and Discrimination and Governmental Lack of Response

Governments have the obligation to protect the human rights of all their citizens and should promote an environment of tolerance and non-discrimination. In both principle and action, where people are endangered, threatened, or face discrimination, it is the responsibility of governments to safeguard universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to life and the freedom of conscience, belief, practice, worship, and to explain and change one’s faith. The right to freedom of religion is found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in states’ own domestic laws. When governments fail to respect those laws, obligations and standards, whether by deed or inaction, they legitimize and facilitate non-state actors who persecute and discriminate against members of vulnerable religious communities, nurture an environment of intolerance, and weaken the ties that support peaceful and resilient societies.

Though Bashar al-Asad tried to claim the mantle of protector of **Syria**'s religious minorities, he promoted a sectarian narrative to describe the country's ongoing conflict while allowing ISIL and other violent groups to flourish in some areas. This created an untenable situation where religiously motivated attacks targeted Syrians across the political and religious spectrum. In many situations, the lack of regime action to try to stop ISIL's and other groups' advances and attacks on specific religious groups and communities laid bare Asad's cynical political calculations in daring to claim the title "protector" of any of Syria's people.

In **Nigeria**, containing Boko Haram and preventing or quelling religiously motivated violence and discrimination remained a daunting task for the Nigerian government. At state, federal, and local levels the government failed to investigate, prosecute, and punish perpetrators of violence or other abuses of religious freedom. Security forces remain inadequately equipped and trained to combat Boko Haram. Residents reported the military fleeing their posts during or in anticipation of an attack, and some attacks lasted hours without any response to pleas for military intervention.

In June, after a Boko Haram attack in Borno State, reports indicated that soldiers fled and many deserted, saying they were outgunned by Boko Haram. Especially in central regions, where there were long-standing disputes between Christians and Muslims, the government did little to ensure the implementation of recommendations put forth by numerous government-sponsored panels and interfaith dialogues.

In **Pakistan**, the government's general failure to investigate, arrest, or prosecute those responsible for religious freedom abuses promoted an environment of impunity. This environment fostered further intolerance and acts of violence. Government policies also failed to protect members of majority and minority religious groups. In addition, the persistent use of discriminatory legislation, such as blasphemy laws, including the government's failure to address false accusations of blasphemy and laws designed to delegitimize the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, meant that minorities were often afraid to profess freely their religious beliefs. The Supreme Court announced a detailed judgment regarding minorities' rights on June 20, in accordance with which the government created a National Commission for Minorities with representatives of various faith groups. However, other recommendations from the judgment have yet to be implemented, such as establishment of a police task force to protect minorities, revision of school curricula to promote religious and social tolerance, and steps to discourage hate speech in social media.

Burma's constitution states, "Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution." However, this protection and other antidiscrimination laws do not, by their terms, apply to members of ethnic groups not formally recognized under the law as citizens, such as the Muslim Rohingya in northern Rakhine State. Even where members of other groups are recognized, the promise of non-discrimination is often not enforced. After dozens of Rohingya Muslims were allegedly killed by military, police, and paramilitary security forces in retaliation for the death of a police officer, the government did not grant access to independent forensic experts to examine the scene. This made a credible, independent investigation impossible.

The government continued to subject public events, including religious ceremonies and festivals, to security regulations and other controls. It remained extremely difficult for Muslims and Christians to acquire permission to repair or construct new mosques or churches. The State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee and Ministry of Religious Affairs restricted the political expression and association of members of the monastic community.

In **Sri Lanka**, it was reported that under the governmental regime of former President Rajapaksa, local police and government officials sometimes appeared to be acting in concert with Buddhist nationalist organizations to attack members of religious minorities. On January 12, a Buddhist mob attacked two evangelical churches in the southern town of Hikkaduwa during services, causing thousands of dollars of damage, burning Bibles, breaking windows, and smashing musical instruments. A film of the attack showed police standing idly by while protesters continued their acts of destruction. In addition to church attacks, under the regime of former President Rajapaksa, police continued to use a revoked 2011 government circular to coerce unregistered churches to register or be shut down. On June 15, at least three Muslims were killed and more than 80 people were injured in clashes with the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, "Forces of Buddhist Power"), a hardline violent ethnic Sinhala Buddhist organization with links to the government, during a rally in Aluthgama and Beruwalla. The BBS held a large rally in the streets of Aluthgama to condemn a reported assault of a Buddhist monk by three Muslim youth. During the rally, BBS leaders led a procession through the streets of Aluthgama chanting anti-Muslim slogans. Some 900 policemen on duty in the vicinity failed to act to stop the resulting violence.

In the eastern **Ukrainian** oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, **Russian**-backed separatists proclaimed the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. In the areas they control, the separatists have kidnapped, beaten, and threatened Protestants, Catholics, and members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, as well as participated in anti-Semitic acts.

Religious Freedom Violations, Abuses and Restrictions Involving Governments

In every region during the year, discriminatory laws, repressive policies, marginalization, and discriminatory application of laws had a negative impact on the ability of groups and individuals to practice their faiths.

People cannot enjoy religious freedom unless they have both the right to express their beliefs freely and change their religion without facing persecution, violence, or discrimination. The threat and enforcement of **blasphemy and apostasy laws** during the year had a significant impact on the ability of individuals to exercise freedoms of expression and religion and resulted in deaths and imprisonment.

Individuals accused of violating Pakistan's blasphemy laws continued to face societal harassment, discrimination, and violence. On May 8 in Multan, Punjab, an unidentified gunman shot and killed **Rashid Rehman**, an attorney representing Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer accused of blasphemy. On November 4, in Kot Radha Kishan, Punjab, a mob of some 1,500 villagers accused a Christian couple of blasphemy and burned them alive in a brick kiln. Media, government, and civil society organizations reported the kiln owner accused the couple of desecrating a Quran after the couple failed to repay a loan, and locked them in a room while announcements from local mosques rallied the crowd. On October 16, the Lahore High Court upheld the death sentence of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman convicted of blasphemy four years ago. Bibi has been on death row since November 2010, after a district court found her guilty of making derogatory remarks about Prophet Mohammed during an argument. Her lawyers submitted an appeal on November 24 to the Supreme Court.

On May 15, a local Sudanese court sentenced **Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag** to 100 lashes and death by hanging for allegedly committing apostasy and adultery by marrying a Christian man, in a case brought against her by her family. Separate charges were pursued against her in a Muslim family affairs court. Ishag said she had been raised as Christian by her mother and identified herself as a Christian. The government released Ishag from custody after a higher court overturned her

original sentence in June following significant international pressure, but prevented her from departing Sudan until a month later.

Raif Badawi, a young Saudi Arabian blogger and activist for reform was charged with apostasy. Eventually, after months of court proceedings, he was convicted of the lesser charge of “insulting Islam,” sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment, and given a penalty of 1000 lashes. What he had done was simply speak his mind about his country, his government, and his religion. Badawi remains a prisoner of conscience, jailed for his beliefs and for speaking his mind.

The 2014 report notes a continuation of many restrictive policies affecting religious freedom including laws criminalizing religious activities and expression, prohibitions on conversion or proselytizing, and stringent registration requirements or discriminatory application of registration requirements for religious organizations.

Executions and arrests in Iran: The government of Iran executed, detained, harassed, and discriminated against members of religious minority groups as well as Muslims professing beliefs at variance with state-approved doctrine on charges of *moharebeh* (enmity against God) and anti-Islamic propaganda. On September 29, authorities executed Mohsen Amir-Aslani for making “innovations in the religion” and “spreading corruption on earth.” Human rights groups reported that charges against him included insulting the prophet Jonah and promoting his own interpretation of the Quran. At the end of 2014, several hundred Baha’is, Christians, Sufi and Sunni Muslims, Yarsanis, and Shia Muslims professing unapproved doctrine were in detention because of activities related to the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs, many arrested during raids on religious gatherings.

Crackdown on state-sanctioned Christian churches in China: The government sentenced Zhang Shaojie, a prominent state-sanctioned Christian pastor, to 12 years in prison on charges connected to his advocacy on behalf of his church community. Local authorities also shuttered many churches under the pastor's jurisdiction as head of the district Protestant organization. Numerous international media sources reported that local authorities ordered the removal of hundreds of Christian crosses from churches in Zhejiang Province throughout the year.

While most incidents involved the removal of crosses and steeples, a handful of prominent churches were demolished, including the Sanjiang Church in the city of Wenzhou that was leveled in April despite efforts by its parishioners to form

human shields to protect it. Zhejiang officials stated that crosses and churches needed to be “demolished” as “illegal structures” that violated local zoning laws. Unofficial “house” church members continued to face harassment and detention. Security officials frequently interrupted outdoor services of the unregistered Shouwang Church in Beijing and detained people attending those services for several days without charge. Reports indicated the average length of these detentions increased from hours to days. Several members of the church's leadership, including Pastor Jin Tingming, remain under periods of extrajudicial detention since leading open air services in 2011.

Restrictions on Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists in China: The Chinese government increasingly cited its concerns over the “three evils” of “separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism” as grounds to enact and enforce repressive restrictions on religious practices of Uighur Muslims. After disagreements arose in response to stricter government controls on religious expression and practice, police shot and killed Uighur Muslims during house raids and protests, according to a human rights organization. In the months following, the Xinjiang government approved a ban on the practice of religion in government buildings and wearing clothes associated with “religious extremism.” Authorities also approved a ban on the wearing of Islamic veils in public in the capital city of Urumqi. In August and September, state newspapers reported hundreds of children were “rescued” and dozens of persons were detained in a sweep of “illegal” religious schools.

Authorities often justified official interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating them with separatism and pro-independence activities. On February 28 Authorities detained Tashi Paljor, a monk at Wenpo Monastery in Qamdo (Chamdo) Prefecture of the Tibetan Autonomous Republic, for his alleged possession of politically sensitive writings and recordings by the Dalai Lama. He died after being severely beaten in custody, according to Radio Free Asia.

Restricting free expression on basis of religion in India: Authorities continued to enforce laws designed to protect “religious sentiments” which, according to observers, at times had the effect of limiting free expression related to religion. On September 24, police in Rustampura, Gujarat arrested Mehdi Hasan, a Muslim cleric, on charges of insulting Hindus’ religious sentiments after a member of the Hindu community complained about Hasan’s comments during an interview with a Gujarati newspaper. During the interview, Hasan reportedly labeled those who honored the nine-day Hindu festival Navratri as “demonic.” Hasan remained in judicial custody until serving out his sentence on October 2.

Persecution of Falun Gong in China: Authorities reportedly instructed neighborhood communities to report Falun Gong members to officials and offered monetary rewards to citizens who informed on Falun Gong practitioners. Detained practitioners were reportedly subjected to various methods of physical and psychological coercion in attempts to force them to renounce their beliefs. Reports from overseas Falun Gong-affiliated advocacy groups estimated that thousands of adherents in the country had been sentenced to terms of up to three years in administrative detention. According to the human rights monitoring NGO Dui Hua Foundation, there were 2,201 Falun Gong prisoners as of June 30.

Intensified harassment of unregistered Mennonites in Vietnam: Police, local authorities, and hired men in Binh Duong Province began a campaign of harassment against an unregistered Mennonite group in June, according to their pastors. Church leaders reported government forces throughout the year raided Bible classes, detained and beat congregants, and harassed members of the religious community. Reports also state that hired men prevented the movement of church members, vandalized a Mennonite church, and barred followers from leaving their houses.

In the wake of the **Russian Federation's occupation of Crimea**, religious minorities, in particular members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and Muslim Tatars, have been subjected to harassment, intimidation, detentions, and beatings. Russian occupation authorities ordered all religious groups to re-register with the Russian government or face losing their legal status. The occupation authorities also seized control of UOC-KP religious property and raided mosques, confiscated literature they deemed "extremist," and formed a Crimean Tatar organization as a rival to the authentic representative body of the Crimean Tatars in order to supplant the local Muslim leadership.

Some religious leaders, including the region's chief reform Rabbi, were threatened and fled in the initial days of the occupation, while many Catholic Priests and nuns and Turkish Imams were denied residency permits and had to leave.

Combatting Terrorism and Violent Extremism as Justification for Undue Restrictions on Religious Practice

In numerous authoritarian countries around the world, regimes have co-opted the language of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism as a means to neutralize political opposition seen as emanating from peaceful religious individuals or groups. In such countries, authorities have increasingly sought to

control the content of mosque sermons and those authorized to deliver them as a central tenet of their efforts to counter violent extremism, in part to counter Islamist discourse they perceived as inciting violence, including acts of terrorism.

Many Central Asian governments used the pretext of violent extremism to crack down widely on peaceful religious activities. In **Uzbekistan**, the government enforced its policy to broadly ban Islamic groups it categorized as extremist without any reference to violent activities. Authorities continued to detain members of several of these Islamic groups, and according to their family members, some died while in custody. Abdurakhim Tukhtasinov, a prisoner charged with membership and leadership in the banned religious organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, died in custody in June. Similarly, in **Tajikistan** the government continued to arrest individuals suspected of involvement with banned religious groups labeled extremist by the government, but not specifically on the grounds of violent activities. On August 18, law enforcement officials in Farkhor district announced they had detained five individuals on suspicion they were involved in the banned Salafiya group. The “suspicious behavior” included praying differently at the mosque and ignoring traditional Hanafi Islam rules and procedures.

Positive Developments in 2014

While the IRF report aims to shed light on the world’s most flagrant religious freedom challenges, it also seeks to highlight positive actions taken by some governments to provide greater protections for religious minorities and to ensure the human rights of individuals to worship, practice, learn, teach and believe, or not believe, according to their own conscience. Religious and civil society groups took steps to promote greater respect for religious diversity, and there were examples throughout the year and across the globe of interfaith cooperation and dialogue.

Improved status of largest population of Christians in Middle East and largest religious minority in Egypt: Egyptian Christians (Copts) have long suffered from recurrent acts of violence, for which successive Egyptian governments have generally failed to hold the perpetrators responsible. Successive Egyptian governments have also failed to redress policies that discriminate against Christians, especially the onerous discrimination they have faced in church construction and renovation. Under the interim and al-Sisi governments, there have been encouraging improvements in the status of Christians in Egypt. There have been some convictions of perpetrators of violence against Copts, although impunity from prosecution for such crimes remains a serious problem. The new

Egyptian constitution provides increased human rights protections as compared to the previous constitution, including a stipulation of equality before the law irrespective of religion. It also requires that parliament pass a new law facilitating the construction and renovation of Christian churches, which is without precedent, and provides for the establishment of an anti-discrimination commission to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

Release of Religious Prisoners in Turkmenistan: In October, the government granted amnesty to and released from prison eight of nine Jehovah's Witnesses long incarcerated as a result of their religious convictions, including their principled objection to compulsory military service, after their inclusion in a list of religious prisoners presented by the U.S. Embassy.

Societal Response to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and forms of intolerance in various countries: After the February 14-15 terrorist attacks in **Denmark** that killed a guard outside a synagogue and a filmmaker at a free speech event, thousands of people of different faiths formed a human ring outside the synagogue in Copenhagen to "send a powerful statement" that "Jews should be able to have their religion in peace." Swedes and Norwegians also formed a human ring around their capitals' main synagogues in an inter-faith show of support. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, along with other national politicians, condemned anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rallies and called for tolerance and understanding of Muslims and foreigners living and working in **Germany**.

Constitutional Chamber ruling part of religion law unconstitutional in Kyrgyzstan: On September 4, a nine-judge panel of Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Chamber ruled sections of the 2008 Religion Law unconstitutional, which eased registration requirements for religious organizations with fewer than 200 members.

U.S Policy and Programs in Support of Religious Freedom

Freedom of religion is a first of many inalienable rights enshrined in the U.S Constitution and other laws. We believe freedom of religion is a universal right that governments should neither be able to grant nor withhold. The United States strongly believes that protecting freedom of religion promotes mutual respect and pluralism, and is essential to human dignity, robust civil society, and political and economic development. Around the world, we focus on concrete, positive steps to support government and civil society groups in combatting religious intolerance and promoting respect for religious freedom for all.

During the year **most embassies raised the issue of religious freedom routinely** and at high levels. Ambassadors, chiefs of missions, and embassy staff in all corners of the globe engaged with government officials, religious leaders, and advocacy groups to promote religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Where there were new and ongoing cases of repression of members of religious minorities, detentions, and governmental and/or societally driven discrimination and violence, the U.S. engaged officials up to the highest levels, calling for peace and respect for the rule of law. In several countries, the U.S. partnered with civil society and faith-based organizations to support religious freedom programs, promote interfaith dialogue, exchange ideas, and work together toward more peaceful and tolerant societies.

Responding to atrocities in Iraq: In August, after ISIL trapped tens of thousands of Yezidis on Iraq's Mt. Sinjar with no food or water, President Obama announced that the U.S. would respond by engaging in military action in the Mt. Sinjar region. He explained that the United States "can act, carefully and responsibly, to prevent a potential act of genocide" against the Yezidis.

The U.S. military conducted seven nightly humanitarian air drops between August 8-13, delivering more than 114,000 meals and 35,000 gallons of water to those displaced on Mt. Sinjar. Targeted airstrikes helped protect the evacuation route as people were escaping. During that week, most civilians were able to evacuate from Mt. Sinjar, preventing the near extermination of this ancient religious group.

The U.S. government increased its engagement with the government of **Burma** on religious freedom issues. During his visit to Burma in November, President Obama spoke out against discrimination against all religious minorities, including Muslim Rohingya. Senior U.S. officials have consistently raised U.S. concerns about religious freedom and called for a path to citizenship for members of the Rohingya population that does not force them to self-identify as members of an ethnic group or nationality to which they do not believe they belong.

In April, an interagency team led by the Department of State's Senior Advisor for Faith Based Community Initiatives engaged with faith-based communities in **Ethiopia**. The interagency team met with leaders from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Muslim community, interfaith organizations, religious charity associations, civil society, and government; to address religious freedom concerns including the ongoing detentions of peaceful Muslims who have protested government interference in religious affairs since 2012.

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials repeatedly expressed to government officials of **Brunei** the United States belief that full implementation of the Sharia Penal Code (SPC), including the severe penalties in the remaining phases, would undermine several of the country's international human rights commitments, including the freedoms of religion and expression. In May, the State Department Spokesperson expressed serious concerns about provisions of the SPC in comments that generated significant media coverage.

In **Pakistan**, the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held meetings to discuss the importance of prioritizing religious freedom and the negative impacts of blasphemy laws on members of minority religious communities. With government officials, religious leaders, academics, and civil society leaders from all religious backgrounds, including for minority Muslim groups and Christian communities, he argued that such restrictions on speech are detrimental to Muslim communities and to the country.

Embassy and consulate staff in **Indonesia** appeared on a number of nationally televised programs to discuss themes related to religious tolerance and diversity. In July, the embassy hosted the three-day Bhinneka Tunggal Ika-E Pluribus Unum Camp and blogging competition for students and youth leaders representing all major religious groups and campus organizations, to promote religious tolerance and pluralism. The event closed with an iftar celebration hosted by the Ambassador for camp attendees, religious leaders, senior government officials, and representatives from NGOs focused on religious freedom issues.

We urged **Chinese** authorities to take steps to reduce tensions, uphold China's international commitments to protect religious freedom and other universal human rights, and reassess counterproductive policies in Xinjiang and other ethnic areas. The United States also strongly supports the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions and the protection of human rights for Tibetans in the People's Republic of China.

U.S. officials sought out Syrian religious groups and leaders in **Syria**, the United States, and throughout the world to promote their communities' full inclusion and respect for their human rights in Syria, both currently and in a future free and democratic state. The Special Envoy for Syria and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Shia communities, focusing on providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The United States supported the documentation of violations and abuses committed by all sides of the conflict through the United

Nation's Commission of Inquiry and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.

In **Nepal**, U.S. embassy representatives addressed concerns regarding the protection of members of religious minorities, caste discrimination, freedom of peaceful assembly for religious groups, and the ban on proselytization. The embassy also provided assistance for preservation and restoration, which improved access to major religious sites. Additionally, an embassy micro-scholarship program for underprivileged youth, including Muslims, promoted religious tolerance.

These illustrative examples demonstrate the U.S. government's commitment to promoting and defending religious freedom around the world. But the creation of a more free and tolerant world cannot be accomplished by any one government or institution. It requires the joint, committed efforts of governments, civil society, and citizens from all cultures and all faiths.

It is our hope that this year's report not only identifies abuses, problems and violations, but also creates motivation for action and accountability. We invite governments, community groups, faith-based and secular organizations, students, activists, human rights defenders, change makers, and every-day citizens to use this report to defend and advance international religious freedom, a universal human right to which we are all entitled. While the violation of religious freedom contributes to instability and economic stagnation, respect for religious freedom paves the way for a more secure, peaceful, and prosperous world.